

ALTERNATIVE VIEWS ON DEVELOPMENT FOR THE COASTAL PLAINS REGION: COMMENT

David W. Rasmussen

Florida State University

This paper has the flavor of a radical critique but in substance accepts all the institutions, economic structures and property relations that may be at the root of the economic plight of the Coastal Plains region. The authors properly perceive that the internal institutions of that region do not work in the interests of the poor. Further, this region is exploited by more developed regions which are, in the words of the authors, parasitic upon underdeveloped regions. These insights, I argue, should have led the authors in a far different direction than they pursued in this paper. Although they claim their view differs from the traditional view, their paper does not constitute a substantial departure from traditional liberal positions.

Malizia and Richter present a continuum of development strategies for a region such as the underdeveloped Coastal Plains. The authors do not equate growth with development. Their emphasis on regional income distribution is a refreshing departure from traditional analysis that all too often assumes it desirable to maximize the regional counterpart of that national idol, gross national product per capita. The "racial" strategy would be to establish self-governing workers councils that would plan, implement and defend development programs. These bodies would make productive and distribution decisions in the region. A related strategy is to turn over all plant and equipment to workers who would presumably organize economic activity in a manner favorable to the masses. Since the authors realize such changes in organization are revolutionary, they proceed to seek alternative development strategies.

By this point in their argument, Malizia and Richter have denied their own interpretation of the underdevelopment problem. Even the racial strategies do not come to grips with the exploitive nature of the economic system. They focus on the internal institutions in the region which could be undermined with a more collective decision making body. Unfortunately there is no explicit recognition that the internal institutional structure merely reflects the legal and financial institutions of the entire nation. The only conclusion is that a radical strategy to solve the problems of underdeveloped regions must eliminate the exploitive nature inherent in the capitalist system of this county. When told that forces external to the region are a major source of underdevelopment, I expect a radical critique to address this problem.

Despite professed dissatisfaction with neoclassical development theory, perhaps the authors never really intended to prepare a radical analysis. Thus we move along their continuum of development strategies. The next strategy is one that Charles Reich would call Consciousness II, a strategy of the New Deal liberals. This strategy is one of benevolent government which protects the interests of consumers, makes taxes more progressive and controls anti-social behavior of major corporations. Malizia and Richter seem to reject this strategy because it would represent a major departure in the behavior of public officials and bureaucrats, which is a product of their vested interests in the current system. In an age when one president was dethroned by public reaction to the Indo-China War, when the youth challenge the values of our system and environmentalists are becoming increasingly militant, perhaps such a strategy should not be dismissed so lightly. Interestingly, Malizia and Richter ultimately embrace this view, recognizing that regional develop-

ment requires a change in national priorities.

The moderate strategy is one that unionizes labor, especially in the manufacturing sector. Although this approach erodes the region's comparative advantage in cheap labor, the authors feel that the organization of workers may more than compensate for this short-coming. A simultaneous development of agricultural cooperatives would organize the rural sector. These organizations would both increase the economic well-being of the relatively poor and at the same time offer them a power base that may help them flight decisions made by cooperations and government that are against their interests. This approach is one that is familiar to millions of Americans who have joined Common Cause, Zero Population Growth and all other citizen lobbies.

Malizia and Richter call for federal support for these cooperative efforts in the rural sector. They point out that a redistribution of benefits from the current farm program away from corporate farms could provide significant resources for such an effort. Thus the authors call for a development strategy that combines citizen organization from below and the allocation of more federal government resources for improving the welfare of low income families. Development efforts within the region without such outside help are likely to yield modest returns.

Malizia and Richter have made a significant contribution to the study of regional development. In part they accomplished this by stressing the importance of political economy rather than regional science in the development process. In the past economists have focused their attention on economic growth and the relatively easy problems that are associated with increasing the output of goods and services. Economic development deals with the harder issues of quality of life and environment as well as distributive justice. Malizia and Richter must be credited for analyzing an underdeveloped area in the rapidly growing field of regional science.